

Montana VR Council Meeting Minutes September 7-8, 2005

Vocational Rehabilitation Council

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Helena, MT

Members present: Ian Elliot, Dick Trerise, Denise Corrao, Ruth Straley, Myrle Tompkins, Don Jones, Ron Mills, David Boyd, Claudette Vance, Wayne Nankivel, Carol Lambert, Chris Clasby, Jacob Wagner

Members absent: Dennis Moore, Jim Daily

Staff and guests present: Peggy Williams, Joe Mathews, Bob Jahner, Pat Gervais, Marilyn Daumiller, Barb Varnum, Bev Berg, Bob Maffit, Curly Burns, Tom Hayes, Lisa Neuman, Pam Watson, Brigitte Winfield

Wednesday, September 7

Ian called the meeting to order at 10:00, and members introduced themselves.

Announcements and Updates

Carol Lambert talked about the SILC meeting. Because of a resignation, new officers have been selected—Carol is the new chair, Donna Scott is the vice-chair and Bob Liston is the secretary. Independent Living is having to relook at its budget, because previously indirect costs were not charged to Independent Living, and now they will be.

Ian discussed the Traumatic Brain Injury activities. Montana has a particularly high incidence of brain injury. There will be a Brain Injury conference September 16 and 17 in Helena with some national speakers. They are also working on setting up support groups on reservations and doing trainings across the state.

Medicaid Buy In

Chris reviewed the need for a Medicaid Buy-In program in Montana for people with disabilities who want to work and need to retain their Medicaid. The Department of Public Health and Human Services has applied for a \$500,000 federal grant to come up with a plan for how this could be done. Some of the money would be contracted to the Rural Institute and to Summit Independent Living Center who will be working on getting input through surveys and focus forums. The grant does not commit the state to offer the program, but it does allow the state to thoroughly study the issue and to develop an action plan. The state will hear in November if the grant is funded.

The Big Picture

Joe talked about federal and state issues. On the federal side, Congress has still not reauthorized the Workforce Investment Act of which the Rehabilitation Act is part. Currently, they are dealing with a lot of critical issues—war, hurricane, Supreme Court appointments, etc. Probably the Act will be reauthorized next spring. VR is fully matched on its federal grant this year and even asked for some additional federal money. However, the travel budget is very tight because of the higher than anticipated costs in motels and gas. Probably funding in the near future will not increase, other than maybe a cost of living increase.

At the Council's request, after the last meeting we did write a letter to our federal partner, RSA (Rehabilitation Services Administration). However, they are still going ahead with closing all their field offices, and this will be done by October 1. Everything will now be done out of Washington, DC, and most state VR programs are concerned with the large reduction of federal staff. Monitoring will be done by teams of people who may not understand Montana. There may be an enhanced role for the VR Council.

Social Security has not been successful in getting people to work and off of disability benefits. Social Security is now looking at getting involved earlier and trying to help people with disabilities get to work before they end up on benefits rather than making them fight for disability benefits and then be told that maybe we can help them get off benefits and go to work. Less than one half of one percent of people on Social Security go to work and get off of Social Security.

On the state scene, we have a new department director—Joan Miles. She is highly regarded in many arenas, and we look forward to her starting next week.

The State Workforce Investment Board has just been reappointed. The number of members has decreased from about 50 to about 30, and Joe is no longer on the board. The Governor wants the state plan for workforce rewritten to streamline service delivery. This would probably eliminate the administrative entity, Montana Job Training Partnership.

A couple things are happening in the area of transition. Montana Youth Leadership Forum got funded at \$50,000 per year to fund its one-week summer event for students with disabilities. On another front, the state has received funding for an interagency coordination group to do statewide planning for transitioning students with disabilities from school to work. Dick is on that group, and VR is also represented. Last week federal representatives came to talk to our group, and next month our group goes to Denver.

VR is working on succession planning, because we have a number of staff retiring in the next 5 years. This program (called Futures) gives people experience in management, and they also conduct policy projects in the agency.

Peggy talked about the recruitment efforts for the Council. We have ten vacancies—7 advocates, one from the State Workforce Investment Board, one VR Counselor, and one Native American VR Project. There is a new process for appointing members—the Governor wants to make the selection. We had 16 advocates and one counselor apply. The reason for so many vacancies was: 2 were old vacancies (hearing disability and Native American), 4 term limits, and 4 people got different jobs. Peggy has talked to the Governor's Office three times, and thinks we are getting close to having the new people named. The Governor will take into account geographic area and disability.

Report on Dallas Training

David reported on the State Rehabilitation Training held in Dallas. The agency appreciated David being able to go at the last minute. David had a terrible time with flying from Wolf Point, but finally did make it to Dallas. The training provided an overview of VR, the Rehabilitation Act and the role of State Rehabilitation Councils. They mentioned how critical orientation is.

Consumer satisfaction, Native American, Ticket to Work, etc

Barb Varnum researched a number of ideas for the consumer satisfaction survey. She got a bid from MSU-Billings to do a phone survey of consumers. The cost would be \$6,187 and that would be for calling 50 consumers per month. The Council suggested looking at other organizations such as the Rural Institute (Gail McGregor), MSU, etc. The Council also suggested considering a pre-survey letter before the phone call or with the closure letter. Another idea is to allow the option of doing the survey on-line. Perhaps the consumer should be given the option of how they want to do the survey—mail, phone, on-line. Barb will bring back more information and options to the Council. Barb also talked a little about what to do with the survey. In the past VR has called consumers who had problems and included their name on the survey; VR has also sent out positive notes to all field staff when responses are good.

In the past couple months Barb has visited all five of the Native American VR projects (Section 121's). She met with the project directors and talked about updating two of the cooperative agreements.

In the area of Ticket to Work, Barb reported that approximately 28,000 people are eligible for the ticket in Montana, and 290 tickets have been assigned. The ticket program is not the success that was hoped for.

Workforce Update

Pam Watson from Department of Labor reported on the Workforce program. At the end of August, Governor Schweitzer appointed the new State Workforce Investment Board. They met once already and are looking at the Workforce state plan. They are proposing to amend the state plan and get more services to participants by restructuring the existing system. They would like to see more one-stops in the state;

they believe that an additional \$1 million could be used on participants if the administration of the program were moved into the Department of Labor and we no longer had the two boards (Concentrated Employment Program and Balance of State) and the administrative entity (MJTP). Montana's federal Workforce grant has decreased significantly over the past few years and this would be a way to keep money directly serving participants. Once the state plan is amended, the federal government will need to approve it. Hopefully the new plan will be effective at the beginning of November. Pam sends out periodic updates, and people interested in receiving them should contact her to be on the list.

Business Enterprise Program (BEP)

Beverly Berg discussed recent events in the Business Enterprise Program. This program is authorized in both federal and state laws, and in Montana it is managed by Montana Business Enterprise Inc, a nonprofit organization. The model that Montana uses is vending routes, where a person who is blind or visually impaired services vending machines in many locations (on a route). In July, the program realized it was losing money. The structure of the program was changed so that the vendors are now self-employed, rather than being paid a salary. This will help cut costs and make the program more viable. Some of the routes have closed. BEP's current goals are to find a way to remain solvent; increase the size of routes; continue to pursue vending machines at post offices; get Malmstrom Air Force Base on a route.

News from the field

Bob Jahner discussed some of the accomplishments in the field. VR is trying to do a better job serving people who are Deaf. VR has established a Deaf Services Network with representatives from VR and other agencies that serve people who are Deaf. The group meets twice a year. VR hired a bilingual (sign language and English) counselor in Kalispell and also one in Great Falls. Previously there was just a counselor for the Deaf in Great Falls.

Personnel changes have occurred in Great Falls---Scott Tanner is the new regional administrator, and Tammy Hogan is the new counselor supervisor. Marilyn Trusty, regional administrator in Missoula, is retiring in December. On a sad note, Larry Harlan, former regional administrator in Great Falls, and Bill Lamb, former central office program officer, both passed away this summer.

MVR Futures is a group of VR staff who are interested in moving up in the organization, and they are meeting at the end of the week. They have conducted some very useful projects for the agency.

In the area of policy, there will be a public hearing on September 23 on some administrative rule changes. These are just housekeeping changes and they incorporate federal regulations into state rules.

The new automated case management system is on hold waiting for PHHS programmers to have time. This new system will simplify the documentation counselors need to keep.

Good news—VR is not currently looking at Order of Selection (OOS). OOS is used when VR doesn't have enough money to serve everyone who wants services. The federal rules say that VR must serve people with the most significantly disabilities first.

In the area of due process, Bob is dealing with a couple cases now. In one case, the person's grades were too low, and VR did not want to continue paying for school. This case has been going on for two years. In another case, a trainee for the Business Enterprise Program did not pass the exam, but still wants to be in the program.

Miscellaneous

Peggy Williams talked about the upcoming Montana Association of Rehabilitation conference in Bozeman on October 26 through 28. Anyone is welcome to attend; traditionally VR pays for one Council member to attend. Denise volunteered to go.

Peggy also reported on the Disability Action Alliance of Montana meeting from the previous week. The group would like to present a united front of disability groups to the Legislature and is currently writing position papers on a number of topics. The Council discussed whether they wanted to be involved with this group, and more discussion followed on Thursday.

The next VR Council meeting—November 14 and 15—will consist of 2 parts—orientation for everyone on the first day and planning for next year on the second day. We are planning to have our new members on board, so this is quite an opportunity. We will probably start in the morning on the first day and end mid-afternoon on the second day.

Thursday, September 8

The Council approved the minutes from the April meeting.

Regional Administrator Report

Joe Murphy, Butte Regional Administrator, talked about life in the Butte region. In addition to the main office in Butte, VR also has offices in Helena, Warm Springs, and Bozeman. Joe stated that he would meet his region's goal of 202 consumers placed into employment this year. However, the number of consumers served is down a little. The Butte region counselors are doing extra outreach to educate agencies on the VR program. Joe also discussed the workforce community management teams, which are located in Helena, Butte, and Bozeman. Recently these teams have not been active, but probably will be more active in the future. Joe said that the trend in disabilities in

his region is similar to the statewide trend of more consumers with mental illness and substance abuse.

MJTP Disability Programs

Curly Burns, Tom Hayes, and Lisa Neuman talked about disability programs offered by the Montana Job Training Partnership (MJTP). Curly Burns is one of four disability navigators and is based in Belgrade. The navigators assist people with disabilities find the right place to get services depending on their needs. They work with Social Security, VR, Office of Public Instruction, and other disability organizations. This program will end in June 2006.

Lisa talked about the Montana Choice grant, which will end in September 2006. They are working in four communities across Montana: Glasgow, Cutbank, Butte, and Hamilton. Their target population is people on SSI or SSDI, youth in transition, people in workshops/institutions, and disabled veterans. They work with other disability agencies and find jobs for these people. Over half the people are pursuing self-employment, and the average hourly wage for self-employment is \$10.80.

Tom stated that MJTP would like to put on a disability conference for people in Montana. He did not have specifics at this time.

Committee Meetings and Reports

Committee minutes are included as Attachments A and B.

Other Disability Programs--Independent Living Centers

Bob Maffit, director of the Montana Independent Living Project (MILP), talked about the Independent Living Program in Montana. There are four IL centers across the state: Missoula, Helena, Great Falls, and Billings. Each of these centers also has sub-offices in other towns. MILP is developing two new offices—in Butte and Bozeman. The IL centers are not residential—they provide information and referral; skill training; advocacy (both individual and system); and peer support. One of MILP's goals is to have 12 peer advocates this year. They are decreasing the size of their senior companion program and increasing the peer advocate program. Examples of systems change activities MILP has worked on include ramps at Carroll College; transportation activities in Montana; and working on a low vision planning grant.

Other New Business

Peggy brought some more information to the Council regarding Disability Action Alliance of Montana (DAAM) mission, vision and values. Discussion continued from the previous day regarding the role of the VR Council on the DAAM group. Points brought up were that the VR Council is an advisory group and not an advocacy group. We don't know how radical the DAAM group will be. We don't want someone from the Council

speaking on behalf of the Council at the DAAM meeting without specific direction from the Council. We don't know what the position papers will say. On the other hand, perhaps we should be at the table.

Don moved that the VR Council become a member of the Disability Action Alliance of Montana. The motion was seconded. Motion Failed.

Dick moved that the VR Council continue to be involved in DAAM and Jim should come back in November with more information. The motion was seconded. Motion Passed.

Peggy will send out copies of the draft position papers when they come out in mid-October.

Awards

This was the last meeting for Myrle, Jacob, Chris, and Ian. Peggy thanked the members for their years of service and handed out certificates signed by Governor Schweitzer.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:00.

Next meeting—November 14-15 in Helena.

Attachment A—Subcommittee Minutes
Public Awareness Committee
September, 2005 Minutes

Information was shared on the possibility of doing a TV segment on 'Community Pulse' hosted by Brian LaMoure. It is a 30-minute program, topic specific and could be done promoting a targeted event. The program airs Tuesday and Thursday evenings and at other times for a week. Transportation might be a topic to consider. The timing on this is hopefully early 2006.

Also, a spot on Jay Scott's 'Coffee Break' talk radio show could be considered for 2006.

Peggy will check on news releases for personnel changes in the central office, as well as that of incoming new council members.

Committee members were asked to be thinking about ideas for presenting to the 2007 Legislature. The 'Pocket Buddies' and 'Factoids' were very successful for the 2005 Legislature and might be something we want to consider doing again.

Denise Corrao is planning to do a video of her personal story. She is hoping to have it completed by our November meeting, with the idea of using it as an educational tool.

Public Awareness committee will look for opportunities to promote the image of consumers and the VR agency via a contact person from the central office with the D. C. office.

Attachment B—Subcommittee Minutes
Transition Committee
September, 2005 Minutes

The database was started last year for special education teachers for mailing to make connections.

An introduction letter will be included in the packet for teachers. It was coauthored by VR and OPI and explains transitions.

We suggest that a document be created for anyone to look at and see all the agencies involved in transitions. Bob Jahner will present the idea to Futures for someone to work on it.

Bob mentioned the Memorandum of Understanding has expired and we will need to do a new one. However, without reauthorization, this may be premature. The unwritten understandings are working fine, so we may hold off for a while.

OPI now has a 6-year plan and annual reporting of new data, which will ask questions of students after they have been out of high school for a year.

Brigitte Winfield is the new transitions person for Vocational Rehabilitation.